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ABSTRACT

American schools face pressure to increase their students' test scores. Research reports have shown American students to be particularly stressed over test taking partially because of other outside interests in their lives that also take up time. This paper offers tips to help students relieve stress arising from the testing situation. Students should practice taking tests, be prepared, read the directions slowly and carefully, think positively, and relax. One research study found that students who were allowed to chew gum during a test received slightly higher scores than did students who were not allowed to chew gum. A conclusion is that relaxed students will be better able to concentrate on their tests. (LMI)

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Test Anxiety? Try a Stick of Gum...

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Test Anxiety? Try a Stick of Gum...

There is probably no school left in America that is not concerned with raising test scores. No matter how high or how low they are, the public feels they should be even higher. The question becomes, *how?*

Principals and teachers are breaking their necks pursuing different special techniques and methods to help increase student learning and motivation in the classroom. Staff development and in-service is planned to increase student productivity. Newspapers as well as academic journals stress new ideas. State legislatures push for greater accountability. The pressure is everywhere. The students cannot help but feel this pressure. How can they not, when it is all around them?

To compound the stress from school, parents at home are also involved in the pressure cooker game. They expect their children to not only make good grades, but to excel in extracurricular, social, and community activities as well. Tests as well as daily grades and projects take on different meanings for different families. Many parents are pushing their offspring so they can get into the college of their choice. Other parents are pushing their children just to see them graduate. They are not hoping for higher education, just a high school diploma. Still, the results are the same: stress and pressure for students.

Testing, in education and in psychology, is an attempt to measure a person's knowledge or intelligence in a systematic way. Research reports have shown American students to be particularly stressed over test taking partially because of other outside interests in their lives that also take up time. There are many ways to relieve this stress,

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which includes time management techniques, studying efficiently and effectively, and using stress relief remedies which work for the individual.

American teenagers appear to struggle with the stress problem more than students in other countries. Science News reports American students are more stressed in test taking situations than teens in Taiwan (1994). American high-achievers are torn between the desire to spend extra time on their studies and to pursue nonacademic interests. They like to spend their time socializing with friends, playing sports, dating, and working part time jobs. Our culture sees and values these things as normal adolescent development. On the other hand, the report says Taiwanese students are pushed by their parents for high academic achievement at all costs. The same intensity is not as dominant in American society. David S. Crystal and his colleagues administered questionnaires to 1,386 U.S. and 1,633 Taiwanese eleventh graders. Participants rated the frequency of which they felt stressed, pressured, depressed, aggressive, or anxious about school work. They also noted anxiety-related physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches, and sleep trouble.

Although students in Taiwan noted greater parental dissatisfaction with their school work and higher parental expectations for academic performance than did the American students, remarkably the Taiwanese groups cited less frequent stress, anxiety, and aggression. What are potential causes for this? Only American teens mentioned sports and part time jobs as additional causes of tension. High achievers in the United States devoted much more time to studying than their low-achieving U.S. peers, but expressed the same level of interest in out-of-school activities. Apparently, the out-of-school

activities carried the same importance with both high and low achieving students. Academic performance was the stress producing variable.

Preparing for tests is a key factor in the amount of stress students feel during test taking. Studying in a quiet environment with few, if any, interruptions helps many students to prepare. The student needs to feel comfortable while studying. Most students subconsciously prefer the room temperature to be a bit cool. The lighting also must be good. To be successful students also must be organized and structured in how and when to study. If their notes and other study materials are in a shambles, precious study time will be wasted organizing them. Finally, students must study with a good attitude and good work habits.

But what about the students who are organized and do have good attitudes, but still suffer greatly from test anxiety? There are many ways to relieve stress in a testing situation. The first is to practice taking tests! The ability to do well and reduce stress improves with practice. Students can practice on old tests. Both the SAT and ACT offer preliminary versions for younger high school students. Both are highly recommended. Anxiety goes down as confidence and experience come up. Secondly, take a hint from the Girl Scouts and, "Be prepared!" Knowing the material well relieves stress by building confidence. Although cramming before a test is better than not studying at all, a careful review of the material spread over several days is a better solution. Third, reading the directions slowly and carefully will help put students at ease. Understanding the directions is essential before moving on to the questions. Encourage students who do not understand the directions to speak up and ask. Do not be timid! Last, answering

the easy questions first will help put the student at ease. Particularly on timed tests, students may mark the problems that are giving them difficulty to return to if time permits. It is better to answer five easier questions correctly then to waste time on one problem that they may never figure out. Going back to the hard ones after completing the easier ones will help students to relax. Being relaxed will reduce their anxiety and allow them to concentrate on the problems they have previously saved.

Honors Biology students at Cleburne High School in Cleburne, Texas performed an experiment to see if chewing gum would have any effect on test scores. Dividing the class of similar high achieving students squarely down the middle of the classroom, both groups were given the same biology test. Each group was given the same prior preparation time, the same instruction, and the same amount of time to complete the test. One half of the classroom was allowed to chew gum during the test. The other half was not. After grading the tests, the mean score for the students allowed to chew gum was three points higher than the mean score for the group of students who were not allowed to chew gum. They concluded, something as simple as being allowed to chew gum can raise scores significantly. Gum chewing is a small price to pay for reduced test anxiety and a better grade!

There are also some specific things to remind students not to do while studying. First of all, never think negatively. Always think positively. Steven Covey says, "Begin with the end in mind" (Covey, 1994). If a person begins by thinking they will do poorly, they probably will. Conversely, the person who is well prepared and confident, generally struggles less with anxiety and does better on the test. Secondly, never tense up when

the test is placed on the desk. The important thing to remember is to relax. Take slow deep breaths. Stretch. Do neck rolls. Be creative. Students do better on tests if they can find an effective way of relaxing themselves. Third, if a poor grade is received, many students let it hurt their self esteem. Their confidence propels lower, creating even more of an anxiety problem the next time. But, one poor test grade does not mean life is over. There will be plenty of chances in the future to do better. Students should be encouraged to relax, prepare, and test with confidence.

In conclusion, although American students tend to be stressed in test taking situations, there are many techniques principals can encourage them to utilize. Pre-test preparation, attitudes during the test, and test taking strategies, including gum chewing during the exam, all contribute to better grades. In these days of gangs, random violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy, an ounce of prevention to help reduce anxiety in this one area of teen's lives can certainly be worth more than a pound of cure. Juicy Fruit anyone?